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Identity, mimicry and transtextuality in Mina Shum's Double happiness and Quentin Lee and Justin Lin's Shopping for fangs. Asian American filmmakers: the next generation?

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Asian American Filmmakers, Asian American Films?

Films directed by and about Asian Americans have in the last fifteen years become a known commercial commodity and critical quantity, engaging increasingly wide audiences and impelling career trajectories for these same directors which would have been unthinkable even ten years ago. Namely, the "by" and the "about" can now part company, and films by Asian Americans are no longer necessarily also films about Asian Americans.

This separation probably began in 1993, the year Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* was released to wide acclaim; this was also the year for which *Variety* deemed Ang Lee's U.S.-Taiwanese co-production *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) to be the most commercially successful film, yielding a phenomenal 4,000% return on its initial investment. While Lee's subsequent film, the Taiwan-made *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) remained focused on Asian characters, it nevertheless reinforced the industry image of Lee's talent for depicting intricate cultural rituals. The film was also enough of a critical and commercial success to allow Lee to be chosen by star and writer Emma Thompson to direct her every-award-in-sight-winning adaptation *Sense and Sensibility* (1995). Although Lee says he treated *Sense and Sensibility* as a "foreign film," his ability to stage complex social worlds in an accessible commercial style permitted his move from foreign-language and -themed films to mainstream commercial success--and in the high-brow realm of American Anglophilia no less. (1)

Wayne Wang's background and career make for a somewhat more complex case. Wang has alternated between Asian and non-Asian subject matter, and his films have demonstrated a sense of formal complexity that is both artful and playful. Still, this formal complexity is close enough to Hollywood norms to allow Wang an ever-increasing measure of commercial and critical success. After a succes d'estime with the low-budget (\$22,500) *Chan Is Missing* (1981) and a critical success with *Dim Sum* (1985), made for the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service's American Playhouse, Wang was hired to direct the commercially unsuccessful non-Asian *Slamdance* (1987). Wang returned to Asian characters in *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989) and also in the more experimental *Life Is Cheap*. . (1990), but it was the success of Wang's complex neo-Mankiewiczian *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) which set the stage for his most recent work, the joined-at-the-hip films *Smoke* (1995) and *Blue in the Face* (1995).

With these last two films, Wang returned to non-Asian characters, but with greater critical and commercial success than in *Slamdance*. Wang was also able to divide his split artistic personality between the two films, putting a commercially-appealing kind of formalism into the former, while enjoying greater improvisational freedom in the latter less-expensive film, which was filmed on the set of the former. This split personality is in turn reflected by critical responses to Wang's work, which will identify Wang either as a Hollywood classicist or a European-style auteur: for one French critic, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* isn't just about a love between two Chinese immigrants but also equally about Wang's love affair with Hollywood cinema, (2) while on this side of the Atlantic another writer has paid Wang the "compliment" of comparing *Smoke* to Pasolini's *Mama Roma*--as if this comparison raises Wang up to the level of a European "artist." (3)

If directors like Ang Lee and Wayne Wang can "cross over" to white mainstream films, it is in part because their techniques are not so far removed from a norm of Hollywood acceptability, and so critics can congratulate them for their assimilation into whatever tradition--Hollywood or European--the writer values. Whatever experimentation Wang may employ, he is still able to accommodate himself easily into commercial filmmaking when he needs to. Quite a different case is that of the Asian American Gregg Araki--the drop-dead gorgeous poster-boy for American independent filmmaking. After a series of micro-budget (\$5,000) films marked by Godard's influence, Araki continued in a similar vein with queer-themed *The Living End* and *Totally F***ed Up*. These latter two films allowed

Araki to be identified by the American press (ever eager to detect new "movements") as a member of the queer new wave, the members of whom, if they have anything in common, can probably be distinguished in part by a somewhat higher degree of interest in formal innovation than other minority filmmaking trends--the three stories in three styles in Todd Haynes' perhaps overly-brilliant film *Poison* comes to mind. (4)

Just as Cassavetes on a bigger budget (as in *Gloria*) turns out to be a classical visual stylist of great beauty, so Araki's most recent film, made with the kind of European financing which was so crucial to the career of David Lynch, is an exercise du style--and arguably the most stylistically accomplished independent film to gain release in 1995. (Scratch an avantgarde filmmaker--and you find Vincent Minelli.) (5) With its black-and-white checked hotel rooms, talking amputated heads, alternately playful and menacing sexuality, and over-the-top horror moments, *The Doom Generation* explores stylistic possibilities unlike those of any other Asian American filmmaker--until recently. Yet somehow critics have taken less kindly to Araki than to Wang: one French writer opines that Araki is a frozen-food version of Lynch and Tarantino, apparently basing this notion on the idea that Rose McGowan's blunt-cut black bob haircut in *The Doom Generation* is based on Uma Thurman's in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). (6) Somehow Tarantino is credited with being able to pay homage to Jean-Luc Godard's former wife Anna Karina, whereas Araki must merely be miming the image at one degree of remove. One can only wonder why Araki isn't assumed to be capable of quoting Godard's films for himself, since the critic never explains his reasoning. (7)

But just as Ang Lee's *A Wedding Banquet* is almost never considered part of the "Queer New Wave" despite its gay subject matter and probably also because of its stylistic timidity, so conversely Araki is almost never identified specifically as Asian American, never grouped, that is, with Wang and Lee. Although Araki considers himself to be doubly minoritized (as gay and Asian American), it's the sexuality part of the equation that has had a greater significance for the public. (8) It's as if filmmakers are only allowed one minority status per person. In Araki's case, it's easy to see why Araki isn't grouped with Wang and Lee: despite having groomed his own Asian-American Southern California-version of Joe Dallessandro, James Duval, Asian identity is not explicitly thematized within Araki's work. As Araki himself once said, his films are not about "families eating rice." (9)

Asian American Film: The Next Generation

But the very lack of focus on Asian American identity as a topic, together with his stylistic energies and hipster ethos, arguably make Araki's films more representative of an emerging generation of Asian Americans and thus indicative too of up-and-coming Asian American filmmakers. This generation may be born in North America (like Araki) or Asian-born, but they are often further removed from Asian languages or more immersed in English. They do not necessarily grow up speaking the language of their parents or may speak but not read it. Their knowledge of their parents' customs may be no more than rote and cursory, as religious practices often are for assimilated Jews. They do not necessarily think of themselves as "different" from other North Americans, or they may not want to, and so their identity may not be an explicit topic of reflection, and yet for all that this identity is not simply nonexistent: after all, to ignore something still requires some recognition, however hidden, of what one is ignoring.

Two recent films, one released in 1995 and the other not yet released but currently making the rounds on the festival circuits, seem to speak from this position. Moreover, like Araki's work, these films show a far greater interest in the language of cinema as something other than a transparent medium for emotional storytelling like the films of Ang Lee and (to a lesser extent) Wayne Wang. And, like Araki's quotation in *The Doom Generation* of other texts, from slasher horror films to Anna Karina's haircut, these films need to be understood not just in terms of the stories they tell and the forms they use, but also in terms of the pretexts on which they're playing. Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1995) and Quentin Lee and Justin Lin's *Shopping for Fangs* (1997) may mark the beginning of a "second generation" of Asian American filmmakers. All three are Asian-born and raised in America, Canada or both. Shum was born in Hong Kong and raised in Canada. Lee, also born in Hong Kong, moved to Montreal before receiving his education in the U.S. Lin moved from Taipei to Southern California's notoriously conservative (and mostly white) Orange County at the age of ten, eventually becoming an eagle scout and working his way through the California University system to UCLA Film School.

All three come by their experimental tendencies naturally, albeit from widely different directions. Mina Shum's back-ground is in theater, and she repeatedly returns to theatrical devices like direct address and even to theatrical texts in *Double Happiness*. After his stints first at Berkeley and then at Yale's English department (arguably the place where French deconstruction first touched down in America), Quentin Lee spent some time as a queer experimental video "bad boy," and his early films are more likely to quote Un Chien Andalou than they are to tell a narrative, narrative being a recent interest for Lee. Justin Lin's earlier short films are carefully balanced between an emphasis on film as a formal medium and an interest in economical storytelling motivated by classical Hollywood virtues, while they also range over every stylistic possibility, from neorealism in *Fish and Chips* to heavy-duty montage in *Come Fly with Me* (1995).¹⁰ Lee and Lin met at UCLA Film School, and they collaborated on *Shopping for Fangs*, which Lee produced, each writing and directing half of the film's sequences.

But these are the first narrative features for all three filmmakers, (10) and for these reasons, together with others which I'll explore in what follows, these two films make for an interesting case study in how an emphasis upon film as a medium, including various forms of reflexivity, can be integrated with narrative feature film, and how younger filmmakers are rethinking the way they'd like to address issues of ethnicity and identity. Taken together, the two works give important clues about the future of Asian American filmmaking in North America and the current state of the how people are experiencing identity and its cultural politics.

Playing with Style

The opening of Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* presents a good example of the way self-conscious stylistic experimentation becomes a means for exploring questions of ethnicity and identity. After the actress Sandra Oh announces the scene and take number and operates the clapperboard, she addresses the camera directly in the persona of her character Jade Li. Jade asks us to take her family as "normal," or at least as "white," and we cut from this direct address to the family bickering, the parents mostly in

Chinese and the children in English, about what Jade's sister Pearl (Frances You) calls the "fact" that Jade is unlikely to be married if she doesn't find a husband soon. The humor arises in part through the way the father thinks the word "fact" is something obscene, and also from the way the camera is positioned on a lazy susan which spins with the food as the family members serve themselves by reaching towards the camera. Shum said she conceived this scene (and others) in "large, geometric shapes," no doubt much like the animated credits which follow after the character of Jade returns and reminds us (and herself) that "the Brady Bunch never needed subtitles...." (11)

A lot about the film is laid out in these few moments. The presence of the clapperboard, Jade's direct address to the camera, her appeal to the audience, and the camera's elaborate spinning movement quickly tell us that although the character desires the audience to consider her family as typical, normal or "white," the film will be anything but normal in its style. Not only does the character of Jade break the fourth wall and address the camera directly, but the insertion of the camera within the scene allows all the characters to do so too, if not quite so blatantly. However familiar the terrain, the film will continue to be audaciously theatrical in its breaching of cinematic conventions.

This familiar terrain itself is, more specifically, a familial terrain, one in which cultural conflicts are mapped onto generational conflicts, and everything works itself around the dinner table and within the context of the family. The terrain is, of course, melodrama, and whatever questions about cultural identity Shum's film poses are played out as questions about sex and marriage, being single and being a family member--the "fact" that the older daughter should be "fucked," but only under the guise of marriage to that ever-elusive "nice Chinese boy" of whom her parents dream. In this first family scene, Shum squeezes it all into the smallest of packages, and one can't help but admire her economy: the language divides the characters between the Chinese-speaking parents (Alannah Ong and Stephen Chang)) and the English-speaking youth, and the misrecognition of the word "fact" for what Pearl calls "the other word"--the never articulated homophone "fucked"--provides a "slip of the ear" which allows the central topics of the film--sexual intercourse and/as reproduction of the family unit--to be articulated and evaded at the same time.

Indeed, both *Double Happiness* and *Shopping for Fangs* are eager to deal with sexuality in terms which have little to do with the familial structures clearly weighing upon Jade in this opening scene. Both films have gay characters: Jade goes on a sham date to please her parents with the perfect, gorgeous, black-Jeep-driving Andrew (Johnny Mah), and *Shopping for Fangs* gives us a gay photographer named Clarence (John Cho) who has stayed in America after college and found himself far from China with no papers. Both films portray one-night stands in ways that are frankly erotic: Jade sleeps with the nerdy bespectacled white grad student Mark (Callum Rennie) only to desert him the next morning; and Phil's one-night stand with a beautiful blonde in *Shopping for Fangs* is an intensely erotic series of sexual positions rapidly intercut with darkness--not unlike the use of tableaux vivantes to portray a sexual encounter in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). Indeed, the sign of growth for the gay photographer Clarence is that he stops mourning the end of his long-term long-distance relationship with a boyfriend who's returned to China and accepts what he knows will be a one-night stand with a British Asian man. It is hard to imagine this attitude towards one-night stands in, for instance, *Dim Sum*: the two films in question aim to reconstruct Asian American identity, moving it away from the family and towards the individual. At the end of *Double Happiness*, Jade lives alone and calls Mark, whom she'd earlier dumped, but this is a faint and tentative sign of a couple's establishment, and at the end of *Shopping for Fangs*, when two of the main characters meet by chance and drive off, one has no sense of them as a romantic couple, but rather as two individuals who wander together. (12)

Yet in other ways the two films are widely divergent. Lee and Lin's film, for instance, completely avoids any direct statements about Asian American identity, while it also avoids any language but English. The audacity of *Shopping for Fangs* is less in its use of formal markers to key the directors' identity and more in the appropriation of generic markers by which the film puts Asian American characters in narrative and dramatic contexts familiar from Hollywood cinema: when Phil, the young Asian accounting clerk, comes down with a bad case of werewolfism, both he and the film he's living in have appropriated identities styled by Hollywood cinema. Here the comparison to *Double Happiness* is revealing. The relation between the film's characters and the film itself, between what's "inside" the film and what's "outside" it, becomes fluid, indeed homologous: if the character of Phil becomes a werewolf, then the film we're watching becomes a werewolf movie, and the two levels of mimicry bleed into one another. Shum's film theatrically transgresses borderlines: the use of a clapperboard bearing Shum's own name in the very first shot of the film is emblematic. But the borderline thus transgressed is nevertheless one that is clearly demarcated and thus in a sense unchallenged: it is the character who addresses us, even as the actress holds the clapperboard, a clapperboard which disappears after the film's beginning.

Formal Devices in *Double Happiness*

One of the engaging and refreshing aspects of *Double Happiness* is the way it mobilizes a series of strong formal devices in order to present vividly and theatrically each of the characters, but especially in order to create the subjectivity of the central character of Jade, as well as to mark Shum's directorial presence. Although the clapperboard of the film's first shot never reappears, Jade's direct address at the film's outset nevertheless prepares for a series of scenes in which each family member in turn (save for the absent and never-seen ostracized brother Winston) addresses the camera directly, each situated against a different painterly backdrop. Each shares thoughts and feelings not voiced within the narrative space of the rest of the film--which centers on the family home. But it's Jade as aspiring actress who gets the star treatment: when she acts out being Blanche Dubois and St. Joan alone in the room she shares with her younger sister Pearl, Shum changes the scenery, costume, lights and even sound to create Jade's imagined--and borrowed--reality, so as to buffer Jade from the rest of the narrative. As when she transgresses the limits of naturalistic cinematic conventions by showing the actress operating the clapperboard, Shum creates Jade's imaginative universe so that she can then breach the borderlines by having Jade drop out of character and the flames under her St. Joan die down as Jade is called to the phone by her father.

The film's other stylistic devices often serve a similar purpose--bringing us into Jade's world. Shum uses slow motion repeatedly, often, though not always, in order to demarcate Jade's subjective experience. When Jade enters a room at an extended-family gathering, we see her approach some female relatives in slow motion, and Jade's view of them is similarly slowed down. This device

is likely to be combined with music which synchronizes the characters' slowed-down motions--as when Jade leaves on her "date" with Andrew. But such stylization is not usually strictly subjective: when Jade's one-night stand Mark finds her killing time by swinging on a swingset, she's swinging in slow motion up into the frame when Mark pops into view on the swing next to her, each taking turns occupying the frame. The hip and moody lightweight reverb guitar pop music of Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet (who supplied music for the Kids in the Hall TV show) underlines this and other similar moments, music and slow motion often combining to create transitional set-pieces which move the story along, the story being essentially that of a central character and her development towards autonomy and away from her family.

What's not in Shopping for Fangs

The first thing one notices about Shopping for Fangs is what's not there. Namely, there is a pleasant lack of wailing and gnashing of teeth about Old World vs. New, tradition vs. assimilation, and all those hallmarks of films about immigrant cultures at least since *The Jazz Singer*. None of the fine actors in Shopping for Fangs are burdened with being forced to say things like "We're not Asian and we're not American--what are we?" Here the film veers away from the left-leaning socially meaningful dramas which descend from Miller and Inge, or from the Hollywood social problem film or the more explicit of the Angry Young Man films: Shopping for Fangs is thankfully more influenced by Roger Corman than by Stanley Kramer. The twenty-something characters of Shopping are rather immersed in their own world, one which can be mostly Asian American and one in which it is unnecessary to reflect on what their culture is, for better or worse. This does not mean that the film has nothing to say about Asian American identity, but rather, as I'll try to show, that it says it through different means.

Another thing which sets Shopping for Fangs apart from *Double Happiness* is that the former film is post-Pulp Fiction. Although portmanteau films or films with multiple characters whose paths cross are far from new, these narrative structures have been given a new cache by Tarantino's use of them. Shopping for Fangs opens by introducing its three main characters Trinh, Phil and Katherine, each by name. Quentin Lee directed the segments dealing with Trinh and Katherine, while Justin Lin directed Phil's story. Trinh wears a blonde wig, thrift store dresses and dark glasses (even at night), as when we first see her interrupting an alleyway rape with her chrome-plated revolver and then cheerily serving coffee at a diner the next day. We see Phil (Radmar Jao) before his bathroom mirror yanking out an extraneous facial hair, then ineptly trying to make a date with a pretty young secretary in the Kafkaesque corporation where he's an accounting clerk. And Katherine (Jeanne Chin) is a monotone-voiced housewife who explains her blackouts, such as the one where she loses her wallet, pager and cellular phone, to her psychiatrist. What Katherine doesn't see, but we do, is that Trinh has found Katherine's purse and forms a lesbian crush on her, which Trinh confesses to Clarence, the young gay photographer who is a habitue at the diner where she works. With this the film is off and running. Katherine explores herself and her past, while pursued by an incomprehending muscular husband who's also Phil's boss (Clint Jung), while Trinh pursues Katherine and nurtures her asexual friendship with Clarence, and Phil comes to find that his extraneous hair is part of a much larger problem, which is twofold: not only is he a werewolf, but he can't get a date to save his life. In none of this does anyone mention that all of these main characters are Asian American.

Bildung Under (De)Construction

Also missing from Shopping for Fangs are scenes of families having elaborate meals, parents bemoaning the waning of the power of cultural traditions on their children and in general, as Gregg Araki would have it, "people eating rice." If the sometime-werewolf Phil and his sister Naomi take turns striking paternalistic attitudes towards each other, they also bridle at this unwanted supervision. These are characters who don't even want the hint that they're someone's child, that they're anything but autonomous adults. Whereas *Double Happiness* is very much a narrative of bildung, of Jade's formation and growth towards independence, the characters in Shopping for Fangs are already independent, and yet this independence is not treated as a virtue in and of itself but rather as a site of ambivalence. The fact that to be autonomous is itself a sign of a dependence upon cultural mechanisms other than the family--such as the media--will be one of the points we glean from the film.

Indeed, if *Double Happiness* seems to narrate Jade's psychological development, the story Shopping for Fangs tells about identity is considerably more psychopathological than developmental. Far from being formed, everyone's in the process of being deformed. Each character in the latter film has some obsession or idee fixe: although his doctor slyly suggests that he "release a little tension," Phil believes instead that he's a were-wolf; Trinh has a crush on Katherine, whom she's never met but to whom she sends flowers and photo's, and Katherine has blackouts to go along with her Gothic life, in which madness lurks inside an image of domestic "perfection."

Here Shopping for Fangs investigates the particular stumbling blocks that gender identities pose for Asian Americans, and the film puts equal emphasis on the precarious situations of both men and women. On the one hand, Phil's problems with body hair not only recapitulate adolescence in a highly aggravated form, these problems also seem to imply the infamous difficulty of reconciling Asian American identity and masculinity. (13) On the other hand, Trinh and Katherine present opposite strategies for being an Asian woman: Katherine's all traditional submission, albeit within a completely whitebread image of upper middle class 'security,' while Trinh has upended every stereotype of femininity in order to make herself into a parabolic gun-wielding lipstick lesbian. True to the Gothic sources of the story, Katherine's "illness" can ultimately be traced to her husband: he gets worse as she gets better, since her illness was predicated on the illusion of his health, and when that illusion crumbles, she can begin her cure.

Playing the Identity Game

In lieu of parents, the role of investing in Asian cultural values (or Asian culture as a value) is taken up by whites who fetishize an authentic otherness in which the film is loath to believe. Phil's sister's gringo boyfriend (Scott Eberlein) knows the name of the Asian dish that she prepares, whereas Phil does not, and Phil's wry astonishment that his sister even knows how to make the dish speak volumes about these characters' relation to tradition without over-underlining. The same observation about white investment in the

Asian's otherness appears in *Double Happiness*: Jade's friend Lisa's boyfriend has an apartment decorated with paper lanterns ("... [S]ale... at K-Mart?" Jade quips) and a fridge filled with imported Chinese beer. In both films, this reversal is an object of humor but not a point for doleful complaints by elders. Rather, it's the younger generation who recognize something the parents in *Double Happiness* don't even observe: their own "authenticity" has become an object of desire in the culture which the parents seek to keep at bay and into which they would have their children assimilate.

Such moments are crucial indices of a complex on-going process of reflection between self and other in which one's self becomes what the other takes one to be. Given Shum's theatrical background and given also that the central character Jade in *Double Happiness* is an aspiring actress, it is not surprising that the film includes an intense consciousness about roles and role-play. What is interesting is how far this conception of performance extends into ethnic identity. When Jade first meets her love-interest, the nerdy whiteboy Mark, she avoids talking to him (and slyly prepares to humiliate him and gain the upper hand) by impersonating a sweet Asian girl with poor English-language skills. Sandra Oh's performance here as Jade is a wickedly funny spoof on cultural stereotypes--she covers her mouth with her hand, giggling, nodding shyly and making brief and soft staccato sounds. When Jade reveals her perfect grasp of English, she can taunt Mark by mimicking the absurd gesticulations he had used in trying to communicate with her impersonation of giggling incomprehension.

In this scene, Jade performs her assigned ethnic and gender role so that she can destroy that role by revealing it to have been a performance, a stereotype mimicked in advance of the other's expectations. Cultural identity here becomes part of a complex, strategic interaction ritual in which each player anticipates the other's expectation so that it can be acted out as a bluff and as bait for a trap. As in the famous Freudian joke about the Jew who expects his interlocutor to lie and thus experiences that interlocutor's honesty as a refined form of lying, the "truth" of identity in this form of cultural interaction dissolves in a strategic game of bluff and counter-bluff. Much of *Double Happiness* could be understood as a series of similar masquerades. Looking in the mirror before her date with the handsome and eligible Andrew, Jade sees herself as her mother has dressed and coifed her and says despairingly, "I look like Connie Chung." The date turns out to be a sham, a performance of a date, since Andrew turns out to be gay but not out of the closet to his family. Not only does the date become a charade of heterosexual courtship, but Jade helps cover for Andrew by enacting a hilarious scam on the mother: she says, with subdued horror, that she won't be having another date with Andrew because--gulp--he made her pick up the check! Jade's performance of a frustrated heterosexual is carefully juxtaposed with Andrew's similar feigning: both knowingly manipulate their families' expectations of them.

Examples could be multiplied at length. (14) The point is that everyone in *Double Happiness* is impersonating someone or something for some audience, and identity is figured not only as a performance, but as a strategic one. Further, these tricky moves are equally likely to backfire and to trick those, like Jade, who try to profit by them. Jade's family has her watch the local Asian newscaster--the very pinnacle of minority integration and visibility. It is alright, Jade's family thinks, and even admirable, to be visibly different, as long as one is audibly indistinguishable from a white cultural norm. They would like Jade to remodel herself in the acoustic image of the mainstream, and so the minority newscaster as a spectacle of assimilation becomes the only form of show business Jade's family will tolerate--in part because it signifies economic success. But this split between visual and auditory appearance can run in multiple directions. Later this same figure of the accent-less Asian English-speaker reappears not as an ideal model but as a textual trick: when an accentless female voice answers the phone at the apartment of the Li family's disinherited only son Winston, Mrs. Li (Alannah Ong) assumes, much to her horror, that her estranged son's live-in girlfriend is white. But Shum cannily shows us what Mrs. Li can't see: that Winston's lover is Asian but neither sounds nor speaks Cantonese.

Jade is thus constructed both through her proximity to an auditory simulation of the "whiteness" which she asks us to grant her family at the film's outset and also through her distance from an immersion in her parent's Cantonese language. Together, these define Jade's neither-nor position between the rock of assimilation and the hard place of otherness. While looking Asian is alright for those who sound "white," even this separation also poses a problem: when, early on in the film, Jade is asked to read her tiny part with an accent, she volunteers a French accent, only to realize, to her humiliation, that it is of course a "Chinese" accent that's expected of her. Here because Jade looks Asian, she's expected to sound it, too. Likewise, Jade is positioned by the film on the wrong side of the barrier between spoken and written Chinese: towards the film's end, she fails at an audition for a far bigger part because, although she can speak some Cantonese, she cannot read it. In these ways, Shum continually structures her text around these discrepancies between acoustic and visible differences, and so reconstructs Asian ethnic identity as a series of differences, each of which can be treacherous and is potentially unstable.

Ethnicity and/as Masquerade

But while in many ways language--reading, speaking, understanding--is in many ways the key figure for identity in *Double Happiness*, the film also explores an understanding of identity in terms of images and the corresponding performance of an image in mimicry or masquerade--as in Jade's performance of giggling incomprehension before her future lover Mark--and this figuration of identity which is even more central in *Shopping for Fangs*. Such mimicry and masquerade were already at play in Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* when the young cabbie Steve (Marc Hayashi) improvises a series of imitations of various black and Chicano styles of hip street language. (15) Lee and Lin are like this character: talented and street-wise youngsters slyly appropriating hip and urbane signifiers of hipness and urbanity. If all the characters in *Shopping for Fangs* are attempting to escape an image of Asian identity predicated on a lack of aggressivity, the film's title acutely figures the process of acquiring an identity in terms of an act of consumption (i.e., shopping) and in terms of a film genre (i.e., fangs). This titular figure thus gives us access to the central problematic of the film: that of acquiring an identity in a marketplace populated by images which structure our self-image. This process of finding an image to which one can conform oneself is made all the more complex by the kinds of strategic considerations in intercultural dynamics which are so clearly exposed in *Double Happiness*: namely, to what extent is my image of myself determined by the other's image of me, and what is my relationship to that other's image of myself, especially when the other sees me as Other?

Here *Shopping for Fangs* and *Double Happiness* are illuminating when read in the context of writing on that topic: Frantz Fanon's

analysis of the way mimicry and masquerade structure identity in the framework of colonialism, as well as more recent writings such as those of Judith Butler and Mary Ann Doane which understand gender and sexuality in these terms, as well as in terms of the category of performativity. (16) Here it is notable that both Fanon and Lacan drew upon both Freud and Sartre as sources, since the intersection of psychoanalysis and Sartrean phenomenology is exactly the logical place where one would expect an analysis not only, on the psychoanalytic side, of the role of the image in the formation of the self but, on the Sartrean side, of the way these images are experienced affectively and of their political valences.

In many ways, one of Justin Lin's earliest films already emblemizes with admirable economy this play of self and other and its attendant anxieties about assimilation. In his award-winning non-synch short *Soybean Milk* (1994), the central character is a nameless Chinese streetsweeper. He works in a big city's Chinatown where he's constantly getting in the way as people take tourist snapshots of themselves in front of carefully-arranged spectacles of Sinicity. He tries to learn English by tape while surrounding himself with mass cultural images of Anglos: these images even surround the mirror which reflects back his face. After failing at his goal of ordering a hamburger in a restaurant filled with whites, he seems to have a mystical experience, which is precipitated either by seeing his own face reflected back from a glassframed movie poster at a bus stop, or by a visit to a Buddhist temple. Each of these two scenes has its own visual logic: in the former scene, the Asian character's face is reflected back at him on top of Steven Seagal's impassive face on the movie poster, whereas in the latter scene, the streetsweeper and the Buddha seem to exchange glances in shot-reverse shot. The streetsweeper cuts off all his hair à la Taxi Driver and, having recognized his resemblance to the Buddha, he dresses in robes and offers himself to be photographed with and by white

tourists, thus actively entering into white imagery of the self posed before and in contrast to an ethnic other where before he had merely been an obstruction. The titular soybean milk container holds his earnings, and an Asian version of Madonna's "Material Girl" plays over the closing credits.

Lin's nameless streetsweeper is snared by media images which both exclude and captivate him. His solution is to conform himself to an image, in this case an icon of 'Sinicity,' (17) and thus to become an image for others what they believe this ethnic "other" to be: a happy smiling Buddha which is at the furthest remove from the streetsweeper's daily experiences. The character's relation to the statue of Buddha, which is organized as shot-reverse shot, is structured on the principle of the two earlier shots in which the character sees his own reflection: once surrounded by images of Anglo's, then prior to his visit to the temple, when his face is reflected from the glass over a movie poster. The streetsweeper starts having the relationship to Buddha which he has to models and stars. Although Lin neither wrote nor directed the sequences of *Shopping for Fangs* involving Katherine and Trinh, this structure is nevertheless emblematic of the snares which trap all the characters in *Shopping for Fangs*: Katherine's "perfect" home and "ideal" husband are like suffocating images from a magazine; the character of Trinh dresses like a blonde Hollywood starlet circa 1950's, complete with dark glasses, and likewise Phil's "lycanthropy" is a disease he could only have caught from horror films. Indeed, Lin repeatedly poses Phil in front of a mirror, as each fresh growth of hair provides yet another horror in his ever-changing identity. None of these images are "natural" to these characters: Phil's hirsutism is no more "natural" to him than Trinh's dresses are to her, and the sudden changes in Phil's hair and beard are sudden, improbable, even pleasantly hokey--as if we're conspicuously not being asked to believe in Phil's plight.

Here we can mark yet another of the differences between *Shopping for Fangs* and *Double Happiness*, a difference which again springs from a point of contact. When *Double Happiness*'s Jade declares at a family gathering that she wants to become an actress, one female relative's immediate reaction is "Like Marilyn Monroe," a response which provokes mirth among the other female relatives and the feigned mirth of Jade herself. It's difficult not to think of this scene in the context of *Shopping for Fangs*, in which the gun-wielding lesbian diner waitress Trinh seems to be modeling herself on Marilyn Monroe (particularly in her stance) or some similar (white) blonde bombshell. (18) Although *Double Happiness* lets Jade play Blanche Dubois and St. Joan in her fantasy world, the trajectory of that film is to humiliate her (through her two painful auditions) into recognizing that not only will she never be asked to play a character with anything but an "Asian" accent, but also at the same time Chinese-language roles are off-limits to her. (The story is somewhat different for Sandra Oh, the actress playing Jade, since she gets to play the part we're watching, a part which fulfills the wish expressed by the character: namely, to play the kind of part which gets one nominated for awards, as Oh was because of this film.)

Shum's Jade comes to know she will never be Marilyn Monroe, but Lee's Trinh doesn't know this, or won't abide by the knowledge, and so Trinh acts the part anyway, and in her diegetic life, not an alternative imaginative universe. Trinh doesn't get the slap in the face that Jade gets in part because the separate spaces of socio-familial reality and individual imagination which can only collide in *Double Happiness* are already collapsed in *Shopping for Fangs*--in part because the familial definition of reality has itself been removed. *Shopping for Fangs* is more utopian, or perhaps pathological: the "reality" of other's images of one's self can be kept at bay, in part because one has already appropriated the other's image of itself as one's own. As Lin's streetsweeper at one moment takes a movie poster for a mirror, so Trinh (in segments written and directed not by Lin but by Lee) has taken a generalized image of a Hollywood starlet and said, as the child is believed to say before the mirror: "That's me!"

Beyond Narrative: Transtextuality

It's the relationship between the two films that's of the greatest interest, in part because ideas which are hinted at within *Double Happiness* become full-blown in *Shopping for Fangs*, and matters of behavior within the narrative of the former film are acted out or performed by the latter film as a whole, rather than merely by its characters. This comparison of the two films becomes particularly illuminating when we can point not only to similarities and differences but to the different textual levels at which these points of contact emerge, because it's at such moments that we can reflect upon the modes of analysis which are necessary to discuss these similarities and differences.

At one moment in *Double Happiness* Jade sings the song "Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting" and dances around the kitchen as she

cleans. There's a certain campy wit in this staging of an Asian American character appropriating a mainstream popular cultural artifact (itself produced by artists of another minority) which markets a bogus conception of Easternness for mostly white audiences: it's rather like seeing a woman act the role of a drag queen's version of a woman, thus re-appropriating and commenting on another's image of her. (19) But this brief moment in *Double Happiness*, with all the complexities it implies about cultural identity and appropriation, are the entire substance of *Shopping for Fangs*, with its massive generic borrowings and cinematic references. In the latter case the film itself is dancing around the kitchen, appropriating while mocking mainstream imagery in order to re-negotiate the other's image of oneself, as well as one's own self-image.

These events in *Double Happiness* take place in what we can call, following Roland Barthes, the film's denotation and its connotations, whereas what we are pointing to in *Shopping for Fangs* would fall under a series of terms articulated by Gerard Genette under the heading of transtextuality--namely all sorts of relations amongst texts with other texts. Here Genette includes various forms of citation, which he calls intertextuality, commentary, which he calls metatextuality, and parody, sendup etc., which he dubs paratextuality, as well as the relation of a text to the pre-existing generic traits, both thematic and formal, which that text mobilizes, which relationships Genette designates architextuality. (20) Where Shum arguably wants us to enter into Jade's family and her world (the narrative denotation) through Shum's style, the subjectivities Lee and Lin want to construct for us are subjectivities constructed by a parade of pre-existing texts, and to do this, they must forgo authorial touches of the kind Shum applies. Much of *Shopping for Fangs* is at a degree-zero of style: Lin's werewolf segments are particularly notable for their intense narrative economy. (21) The point of *Shopping for Fangs* is precisely to emphasize not only its characters' but its own dependency on other texts.

Some of these transtextual markers have already been mentioned: the portmanteau narrative structure already seems to refer to *Pulp Fiction*, and Trinh's appropriation of a blonde starlet image no doubt appeals not only to Marilyn Monroe but also to Kim Novak and *Vertigo* (1958), in which Novak played someone playing the role of a mad Gothic wife, much like the character of Katherine. But of course the major marker of generic appropriation in *Shopping for Fangs* is Phil's were-wolfish hirsutism. Within the narrative denotation, this "problem" nicely captures Phil's sense of being socially ill-at-ease, and at the level of connotation, this figure carries over from the horror genre a thematic concern with identity, with unwanted transformations and socially unapproved, stigmatized identities. But most importantly, this narrative line riffs on the horror genre, while replacing the typically white central character with an Asian American.

Such paratextual shenanigans are also legible in Quentin Lee's earlier films. In *Flow*, Lee compiled his own short films together with a framing narrative concerning a self-absorbed filmmaker. In a Borgesian twist, Lee either has an actor play himself, or he ascribes his own films to a fictional character. This gives Lee the liberty of interviewing his alter ego and even criticizing his work as either self-indulgent or too conventional. The shorts themselves are apt to borrow from generic conventions of horror, science fiction and noir: in one film, the AIDS virus becomes airborne in 2001 and language-born in 2010; in another short, screams and knives abound; while in yet another a murder story is told in color flashbacks which interrupt a black-and-white interrogation. Similarly, another of Lin's shorts, *Come Fly with Me* (1995), depicts a tiny Asian American boy who idolizes Michael Jordan--and ends up putting himself in a box and mailing himself to his hero. The film liberally quotes the style of sneaker commercials, while replacing the basketball star with the young boy. The source text is thus held up as an image of admiration, while it is also hollowed out.

Here, too, there's rather surprising point of contact with *Double Happiness*: when Jade finally appears on TV, it seems to be in the same kind of horror film which Justin Lin is ripping off in Phil's story. The TV character opposite Jade, speaking of a rash, says "I thought it was a zit at first. But then it started to swell, and now it's grown hairs. Oh my God!" One almost feels that Shum is tweaking the most commercially successful Canadian director, David Cronenberg, whose exploration of masquerades and Asian identity in his screen version of David Henry Hwang's brilliant and much-written-about play *M. Butterfly* failed to find satisfying formal or visual devices for expressing that play's paradoxes. While *Double Happiness* puts itself at one degree of remove from this kind of genre film, *Shopping for Fangs* dives right in and won't separate itself from this kind of "unoriginal" mass media text. It's as if this one scene in *Double Happiness* has metastasized in *Shopping for Fangs* and become an entire narrative strand--the story of Phil's "lycanthropy."

Other markers of transtextuality could be cited, such as the fact that when Trinh and her "girlfriend," Katherine's husband, square off with guns, the moment is straight out of John Woo. But many such details are less important for the details of the original texts than they are for the way these signifiers function to index a generalized "movieness," a glamour and appeal which *Shopping for Fangs* wants to bring to Asian American characters. By taking Katherine's Gothic psychological trauma and Phil's hairy horror syndrome and replacing white with Asian American characters, the film effects a paratextual commentary on the absence of Asian characters from those genres, thus also effecting an architextual gesture of simultaneous participation and refusal of participation in a genre, a gesture which is a political stance, as well as an aesthetic one.

This kind of transtextual labor puts Lee and Lin closer to Gregg Araki, whose quotation of Anna Karina's haircut in *The Doom Generation* was so completely misapprehended by one French critic. This critical oversight is significant not just because it misunderstands the timeline according to which the film was made, but moreover because the critic understood this intertextual citation as a mere form of failure of (romantic) imagination and originality. (One wonders again why the same quotation would mean something different for Tarantino.) Instead, the significance of the critic's oversight is in the failure to understand what is going on in Araki's text--namely, the kind of transtextuality which I've tried to underline in *Shopping for Fangs* and which is what sets filmmakers like Gregg Araki, Quentin Lee and Justin Lin apart from an earlier generation. And the fact that Mina Shum's next film *Drive She Said* will reportedly be a road movie suggests that Shum is also moving in the direction Lee and Lin are currently exploring: out of the kitchen, away from the rice, and towards the territory Lee and Lin explore in *Shopping for Fangs*, which is an identity found neither home nor away from home and over the rainbow, but rather in transition.

Autonomy and Flight

Finally, both films arguably concern and terminate with flight as an expression of the characters' autonomy and of their cultural autonomy, their desired isolation from traditional Asian culture. Double Happiness narrates Jade's flight: she flees her white boyfriend by leaving in the morning before he's awoken, and her flight is made literal when she jumps off a swing upon discovering he's playing next to her; the climactic moment involves Jade fleeing one of the dates her family has arranged with a "nice Chinese boy", in this case a doctor who ironically seems to be played by the same actor who throws a drink in Andrew's face--I say "seems" because the doctor character's face is never seen! In this flight, Jade's seen running down the street, crying and flailing her arms to the thumping rock music soundtrack. It's a potent image--the opposite of the film's last image of Jade sitting in her crummy basement apartment surrounded by a little girl's idea of belongings. The entire film is Jade's slow-motion flight from her parents to a life by herself, a traditional coming-of-age film told with Chinese characters and made modern through Shum's stylistic panache.

Similarly, all the characters in Shopping for Fangs are in flight--or they are even, at times, immobilized. Although Phil chains himself to his bed to avoid the effects of his "lycanthropy," he ends up getting in his car and driving "anywhere," joined by Katherine, who's in the driver's seat. Katherine flees perpetually from her stultifyingly "perfect" husband (who tries to rape her) and her immaculate house. Trinh's home is a hotel-room, which bespeaks her transience, and against the picture-perfect but ultimately imprisoning house of Katherine's marriage, the image of the hotel room (which is central in Araki's *The Doom Generation*) provides a kind of relief. Even before Katherine drives off at the film's end, her blackouts signal a psychological state known in technical terms as "fugue"--which is Latin for "flight."

While such images of flight and independence may be somewhat idealized, it is almost impossible in these two films to lose sight of the price one pays for this flight, of what we hold onto even as we flee. It is here that Double Happiness and Shopping for Fangs are most useful, since both suggest ways for thinking about questions of identity that go beyond a simple concept of the "liberation" of a "true" identity. And on the analytical level, the contrast between the two films allows us to examine analytical issues without either fetishizing formal language and formal innovation or taking specific stylistic features as being tantamount to a "postmodern subjectivity" which is somehow free from any and all constraints of the past. Rather, these films suggest some ways in which what is posed as freedom and flight is precisely a renegotiation of those constraints.

Mina Shum says that when she moved out of her parents' house at the age of 18, she was clutching a Star Wars blanket. (22) The moment is perfect: psychologist D. W. Winnicott theorized that the transitional object was some little fragment of reality which provided the infant with comfort in his or her individuation and separation from the mother, and this transitional object was often something as simple as the corner of the child's blanket. If Shum frames the flight she narrates in psychological and familial terms, as a developmental narrative towards individuality, the little detail she gives us outside the text--that it's a Star Wars blanket--is germane to Shopping for Fangs, since what that film does is to frame its characters' adaptations not in terms of any transition to autonomy but in terms of a dependence much like the film's own on mass cultural images. Both films are mournful about this autonomy, and thus implicitly question autonomy's value, although not perhaps as much as David Henry Hwang's recent play *Golden Child* has done. (23) But in both these films, like in Hwang's play, we can see an interrogation of cultural identity and Western autonomy starting to take place, a questioning which affects the filmmakers as well as their characters.

In Shopping for Fangs the characters are already "autonomous"--or in any case alone--but their autonomy reveals their dependence upon the detritus of white pop culture as a kind of transitional object--like Shum's lonely Star Wars blanket. A banal pop song like "Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting," the image of Marilyn Monroe, or Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, or of an old Universal werewolf movie: these mark the spot where the "autonomous" culture, thinking itself free from family and tradition, plants its feet, even as it's slip-sliding away. What remains to be explored in the future is whether this "transition" to autonomy is ever really achieved or whether perhaps mainstream popular culture as a sort of orthopedic device does not in the end become a permanent if always foreign part of the living being whose development to autonomy it would seem to enable. But that narrative would be something more like a Cronenberg movie: more precisely, the one he didn't make in *M. Butterfly*.

(1) . See Sight and Sound Vol. 6, No. 3 (March 1996), p. 24.

(2) . See Joel Magney, "My Darling Mei Oi," in *Cahiers du cinema*, no. 427, pp. 64-65.

(3) . The Hudson Review, v. 49, No. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 286-293. Further, Wang had already made a stab at joining this particular club by appropriating the music from Joseph Losey's *The Go-Between* for his *Chan Is Missing* but without identifying or acknowledging either Losey or the composer Michel Legrand.

(4) . See Kimberly Yutani's astute "Gregg Araki and the Queer New Wave" in *Amerasia Journal* 20:1 (1994), pp. 85-91.

(5) . And the opposite may be true as well: scratch Vincent Minelli, and you find an avant-grade filmmaker. This is as much a comment about who Vincent Minelli is as a comment about who avant-grade filmmakers are.

(6) . Jean-Loup Bourget, "The Doom Generation," *Positif*, Nov. 1995, p. 44.

(7) . The *Doom Generation* was shot before *Pulp Fiction* was released.

(8) . Ang Lee's status as a married man may also exclude him from consideration for membership in the Queer New Wave, since this membership seems to turn not only on thematic considerations but on the lifestyle of the directors who make up the group. If Araki follows through with his recent statements that homosexuality has become passe and, as rumors have it, is having an affair with a woman, one wonders what will happen to his status as a member of the Queer New Wave. From once having declared himself "doubly minoritized," Araki may end up with no minority status at all.

(9) . Araki made this remark after a screening of *The Doom Generation* at USC in the fall of 1995.

(10) . Quentin Lee's 90-minute long film *Flow* combined his earlier, short films into a kind of narrative about a filmmaker and his films, but the work was not originally conceived and shot as a single film.

(11) . See Shum's statement on the Double Happiness web site maintained by the distributor, New Line.

(12) . In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Madeline/Judy says that only one person can wander, since two together are always going somewhere, but Scottie disagrees. I think this penultimate image of Shopping for Fangs is an homage to *Vertigo*'s image of two people wandering together but not as a couple, together but alone.

(13) . In "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," Richard Fung analyzes some of the ways in which clichés of Asian masculinity (or the lack thereof) structure gay male pornographic videos involving Asian men. *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991).

(14) . Jade forges a better grade on her younger sister Pearl's report card so that their father will think Pearl has achieved straight A's, as a good Asian girl should; the family rehearses a "poem" of greeting in Cantonese for their uncle's arrival.

(15) . See Peter Feng, "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: Chan Is Missing," *Cinema Journal* 35, No. 4, Summer 1996, pp. 88-118, esp. pp. 104-5.

(16) . Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Mary Anne Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 17-32; no doubt also of great influence here was Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); and the locus classicus in terms of race, of course, is Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

(17) . Roland Barthes' describes "Chinese-ness" as the effect of specific semiotic and ideological operations: the stripper removes this already-suspect connotation (signified by an opium pipe) in order to become a "natural"--i.e., naked--woman. But while Barthes also analyzes the way the French bourgeoisie create a fortress of meanings for themselves, he does not consider, for instance, how an Asian striptease viewer would understand the opium pipe. See "Striptease" and "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1972). Barthes' English-language translator Richard Howard prefers "Sininess" (see p. 84), while Barthes himself expresses some equivocation in a footnote (p. 121).

The last shot of Shum's film frames Jade in a window of her basement apartment: she disappears from sight behind the curtain she hangs--which bears the names and images of various stars, including Marilyn Monroe.

(18) . In fact, when gay men are "camping"--trading catty remarks and calling each other "she"--they are in part enacting an exaggerated version of others' stereotype of themselves as "feminine" and as gay. Thus, insofar as camp in this sense enters into gay male drag, this element of irony is already present. See Esther Newton's *Mother Camp*, cited above.

(19) . Here Genette's interest is: ". . . everything which puts the text in a manifest or secret relation with other texts. I call that the transtextuality, and I include there intertextuality in the strict sense (and the 'classic' sense, since Julia Kristeva), that is to say, the literal presence (more or less literal, whole or partial), of one text in another: citation, that is to say, the explicit convocation of a text at the same time made present and distanced by quotation marks, is the most obvious example of this category of functions, which includes others as well. I also put here under this term, which imposes itself on the model of language/metalanguage, metatextuality, the transtextual relation which unites a commentary with the text on which it comments: all literary critiques, for centuries, produced a metatext without knowing it."

". . . I put again other sorts of relations--for the essential, I think, of imitation and transformation, of which pastiche and parody can given an idea, or moreover two ideas, strongly different no matter how often confounded or inexactly distinguished--which I will baptize (for the want of a better term) paratextuality (but it is also for me transtextuality par excellence). . . .

"I put here finally (without omission) that relation of inclusion which unites each text to the various types of discourse to which it appeals. Here belong the genres, and their determinations already encountered: thematic, modal, formal, and others. Let's call that . . . l'architext, and architextuality or simply architexture" Gerard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979), pp. 87-88. The translation is my own.

(20) . I hope one example will suffice: Phil looks in the bathroom mirror and removes a pesky hair while an offscreen neighbor practices the trumpet (badly). As Phil's aggression grows, we return to the same set-up, but Phil interrupts his shaving to leave the frame and yell at the neighbor about the racket. All this dialogue is offscreen, while the frame is empty. Later, Phil believes he's killed his one-night stand Sammi: as he looks in the mirror, he hears the offscreen voices of detectives interrogating the neighbor. The series of three scenes each carefully prepares for the next--insignificant sound 'off' becoming significant. Such construction is a model of classical Hollywood economy, but it hardly thrusts the director's identity into view like Shum's slow motion shot-reverse shot sequences.

(21) . See the Double Happiness web site for this anecdote.

(22) . See John Lahr's astute review of the same in *The New Yorker*, December 2, 1996, pp. 121-123.

(23) . See John Lahr's astute review of the same in *The New Yorker*, December 2, 1996 pp. 121-123

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